

Teaching Canadian History through Participation Drama

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Almighty Voice, Leonard Peterson. Book Society of Canada, 1970, 1974. 90 pp. Illustrated. \$2.25 paper.

Almighty Voice is a participation play for children. That is, it is a play to be presented by adult actors to a young audience who are invited to participate in developing the action; it is not a play performed by children for children. This critique will examine the purpose of the play, its structure, some of the problems that may be encountered in its production, and finally, this particular edition of *Almighty Voice*.

Peterson writes in his introduction:

So much that we studied in school was about faraway wonderments Learning to count and read had obvious uses in our flatland lives but a lot of that other school stuff we sure wondered about. Important events took place in England, men thought great thoughts in Greece, painted beautiful pictures in Italy, invented machines in the States, frolicked in France and made stirring music in Germany But in Saskatchewan men grew wheat, and a few kids got to be good enough hockey players to make it into the NHL. That's about all there was to the prairies.

But then the Canadian playwright discovered the Indian. Eric Nicol wrote *The Clam Made a Face*; George Ryga, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*; Sharon Pollock *Walsh*; Margaret Craven, *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*; Henry Beissel, *Inook and the Sun*; Len Peterson, *Almighty Voice*; and Evelyn Garbury, in collaboration with puppeteer Tom Miller, *Glooscap and the Mighty Bullfrog*.¹ Thus inculcated as we were with the notion that Canada and Canadians had no history worth mentioning and certainly not anything as grand as culture, we turned to an indigenous, although faltering source, that of the Indian.

The tale of *Almighty Voice* is the fascinating story of a young Indian who shoots a stray cow for food to eat at his wedding feast, is imprisoned, escapes kills a pursuing officer in self-defense, and is eventually killed only after the NWMP bring in a regiment and cannons as reinforcements. The story high

¹For more discussion of several of these authors, see Joyce Doolittle; "A Canadian Perspective," *Canadian Theatre Review*, CTR 10 (York University: Spring, 1976), p. 9.

have gone unnoticed quietly collecting dust in the NWMP files where there are undoubtedly many more such dramas masquerading as reports. By dramatizing this event Peterson dispels myth number one—that Canadians have no interesting historical events.

As noted at the beginning, this is a participation play for young children. Participation theatre was originally developed by British teacher and playwright, Brian Way, who introduced his methods to Canada in the late 1950's. What is it, and how does it work? First, it is an ingenious combination of theatre and education. The proscenium theatre is abandoned: most frequently this type of play is presented centre floor with the audience seated on 3 or 4 sides, depending on the available playing space and whether a backdrop is required for quick costume changes. There is a complete absence of formal scenery; instead, there is a reliance on simple props. For example, characters in *Almighty Voice* change roles simply by changing hats. The audience is invited at certain points throughout the play to participate, by creating sound effects, (rain, wind, etc.) becoming groups of settlers, Indians, Mounted Police, thereby helping with the action of the play.² But—and this point must not be ignored—“‘participational’ theatre must still be ‘theatre’ even when mingled with education. The performance is created by highly skilled professionals who, because they are also *teachers* [italics mine] can satisfy children's needs within the artistic experience.”³ *Almighty Voice*, then, is a re-creation of an episode in Canadian history (seen through the eyes of an Indian), which uses theatre as a teaching vehicle, and reinforces what is being taught by getting the children to participate.

This is a carefully researched play, and Peterson has extrapolated the bare bones of the story, fleshing and compressing the skeleton into a verbal, visual and dramatic entity. Len Peterson, however, is best known for his radio plays. This play is not one to sit and read, or to study; much of its effect is vocal, with extensive use of chants, drums and rattles contributing greatly to the development of the climax. It verges at times on melodrama—a legitimate device when used judiciously and extremely effective when used to underscore an important dramatic point which might otherwise be missed. However, today's children are visually oriented, bred as they are on television from an early age. They do not listen well—they watch. They are a passive audience accustomed to instant entertainment at the flick of a switch. This is a play which must be heard, as well as seen; it must receive unrestrained participation for it to succeed as it was conceived.

However, a young audience needs some preparation for this play. At one early performance by the Young People's Theatre, the audience did *not* listen,

²More discussion of participation theatre can be found in Brian Way's *Development Through Drama* (Longman, 1967).

³This quotation appeared in a two-page article by Richard Courtney entitled “Theatre For Young Audiences,” which was distributed to delegates at the 1972 International Congress of Theatre for Children and Youth (ASSITEJ).

missing the significance of the "coup", one of the central themes on which Peterson builds. When asked to participate, they either refused or responded by clowning or directing smart remarks to their friends. The more intensely the actors worked to involve the children, the more they alienated the children, both by their intensity and their proximity. They were not contained in a box with a glass window, but were within a few feet of the audience. The performance rapidly degenerated into an exercise in frustration. The actors, a competent group of professionals, were left exhausted, and because they sincerely believed what they were trying to tell their audience, they experienced a high degree of failure. Those children who were able to identify with the characters and genuinely wished to participate were inhibited by their rowdy neighbours.

What went wrong? It was presumed that the children would participate. However, children of this age (YPT lists this play in their programme as suitable for grades 4 - 6) do not willingly put themselves into an unknown situation where they can become objects of ridicule to their friends. It was also presumed that they would listen and become familiar with the story without prior briefing by either the actors or those responsible for the performance. Yet there was nothing within the children's framework of experience from which they could draw, and as the action took place in an unfamiliar era and dealt with an unknown culture, they did the natural thing: they laughed at what they did not understand. And it is precisely this ethnocentric bias that Peterson is trying to dispel!

This particular performance is cited because, although YPT have been successfully performing *Almighty Voice* since 1973, this edition prepared by The Book Society of Canada, is to be faulted for not pointing out these important essentials to the would-be teacher-director. Had the actors spent a half hour doing some warm-up exercises with the children, while giving some historical background at the same time, they would not have encountered the same degree of resistance. Listening games and exercises also would have been appropriate to the children's preparation for the performance. There is a series of questions at the end of the text which are designed to help the teacher interpret the play with children or young adults when it is read and studied. These questions are useful, but they should include more discussion of the fact that different cultures may have different points of view and values. For instance, it would have been appropriate to discuss the cunning and bravery shown by Almighty Voice when he perpetrated the "coup" in addition to merely presenting his stereotyped description as a "murderer" in the official NWMP file. By whose standards are we to judge his actions?

The suggestions for "Research and Creative Activity" are both interesting and useful. However, the suggestion that they "make a videotape of the play for classroom viewing" is questionable. There is more to making a videotape than pointing the camera at the action and stopping the tape when the action is over. Few schools have the personnel trained to do this kind of project. This could, however, make an excellent term assignment for a senior theatre art class at the grade 12 - 13 level, particularly if they were given the chance to share

their work with a young audience.

The reprints of original documents and photographs make Almighty Voice much more than a paper figure. The two commentaries, one by Senator F.W. Gershaw from *The Calgary Herald* in 1955, the other by H.S.M. Kemp, written for *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Quarterly* in 1957, and finally the historical note by James MacNeill are an excellent idea. The discrepancies between the three and the play itself make a compelling comment on history and its interpretation.

This is a good edition, with the criticisms already noted. History can be taught most effectively from an interdisciplinary approach, and participation theatre is particularly effective. But, like any other method, it must be approached with the proper amount of preparation and research by the teacher. It is a tool only, a vehicle to bring history to life. It can well become a deterrent if misused.

To end with Leonard Peterson's own perspective: "if we admit to our native heritage and ancestry as well, our history and geography may come together, and we may, within ourselves, begin to find shape, substance and worth."

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Treasure Trove, Real and Spurious

PATRICK VERRIOUR

Chinook, Paddy Campbell. Playwrights Co-op, 1973. 25 pp. \$2.50 paper.

Treasure Island, An adaptation in four scenes by James Iwasuk. Playwrights Co-op, 1972. 33 pp. \$2.50 paper.

In a few short years the proponents of child drama have helped shatter that traditional and popular misconception that "theatre" is reserved for the privileged few. Besides championing the cause of creative drama in education, professional children's theatre companies have taken "participatory" plays to the schools, involving student audiences in a wide range of imaginative experiences. Provided that the dramatic script and overall production are technically sound, the story well-written and absorbing, and the actors